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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
The Farm Security Administration
and
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Cooperating

SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR CONDITIONS IN LAC QUI PARLE COUNTY, MINNESOTA

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This publication is one of a series of 11 with similar titles by Tom Vasey and Josiah C. Folsom. The reports are based on surveys made in the late summer and early autumn of 1936 of the economic and social conditions of adult agricultural laborers. The counties studied represent various types of farming in different parts of the United States, as follows:

<u>State</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>Type of Farming</u>
California	Placer	Fruit
Colorado	Archuleta	Stock-ranch
Illinois	Livingston	Corn
Iowa	Hamilton	Corn-Hog
Kansas	Pawnee	Winter wheat
Kentucky	Todd	Tobacco
Louisiana	Concordia Parish	Cotton (eastern)
Minnesota	Lac qui Parle	Small grain
Pennsylvania	Wayne	Dairy
Tennessee	Fentress	Self-sufficing
Texas	Karnes	Cotton (western)

SURVEY OF AGRICULTURAL LABOR CONDITIONS IN LAC QUI PARLE COUNTY, MINNESOTA

By Tom Vasey, Farm Security Administration
and
Josiah C. Folsom, Bureau of Agricultural Economics

During the summer and fall of 1936, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and the Farm Security Administration /1 made studies of wages and working conditions affecting farm laborers in Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, and in 10 other counties in as many States. The funds necessary for this research were provided by the Works Progress Administration.

Enumerators were engaged to canvass hired farm laborers and their employers, and schedules were used to record the information secured from each group. The schedule designed for laborers was rather complete, covering, in addition to age, education, and other such personal characteristics, job descriptions, wage rates, work histories for the preceding 12 months, and participation in community affairs. Farm operators were questioned concerning wage rates, fluctuations in numbers of employees, and methods of obtaining labor. /2

The enumerators were directed to use the limited time available for reaching as nearly as possible all the farms in the county hiring labor, except those that are not primarily dependent on agriculture as a source of income. The exceptions included country estates, livestock dealers, institutions, feed lots, boarding and lodging places, and unclassified farms. As to the laborers, the enumerators were instructed to interview "only those hired to do the work of adults at adult wages." This eliminated all unpaid family labor and any child labor receiving wage rates below those of adults. "Hired labor" or "employees" as the terms are used in this study refer to persons who work for wages and are dependent on wages paid by the farm operator. The amount of these wages does not depend on the income derived from the crop. The status of the operator, whether renter or owner, was not considered.

Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, lies on the border of the Corn Belt and the Spring Wheat areas. In 1934, about 80,000 acres were planted in corn and 20,000 acres in wheat. Hogs and cattle are also raised. There is no one predominant type of farming, but the periods of heavy demand for hired labor come with the wheat harvest and the husking of corn. At the time this survey was conducted, September 22 to October 17, most of the harvest work was over. Haying, the threshing of small grains, and

/1 The Resettlement Administration, prior to September 1, 1937.

/2 The work was directed by representatives of the Department of Agriculture. The officials of the Experiment Station and those of the University of Minnesota cooperated in obtaining the enumerators, Ira K. Takle and William M. Beck of Minneapolis, and Harold S. Johnson of St. Paul.

silo filling had been largely completed. Crop-season workers had been discharged and corn husking was not yet under way. Therefore, except for the winter months, this survey probably represents the slack period of employment.

Of the 2,141 farms enumerated in the 1935 Census, a great many were visited during this survey, but only 183 were found to be hiring labor. On these 183 farms 207 farm laborers were interviewed.

General Characteristics

The laborers who were employed on the farms of Lac qui Parle County at this time of year were predominantly young men. All but one, an Oriental, were white males. Nearly 70 percent were under 30 years of age and only 8 percent were 50 or over. As to schooling, the eighth grade marked the finishing point for two-thirds of the workers, only 17 percent of the entire group having failed to go that far (Table 1).

Table 1.- Age and education of 207 agricultural laborers,
Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, September 1936

Age	Total	Grades completed					
		0 - 4	5 - 7	8	9 - 12	Over 12	
15	1	-	-	1	-	-	
16	2	-	1	1	-	-	
17	-	-	-	-	-	-	
18	11	-	4	2	5	-	
19	13	-	2	8	3	-	
20 - 29	116	-	11	78	23	4	
30 - 39	32	2	8	21	1	-	
40 - 49	16	1	2	12	1	-	
50 - 59	13	1	3	8	1	-	
60 - 69	3	-	1	2	-	-	
Totals	207	4	32	133	34	4	

The proportion of unmarried workers was larger than might have been expected from the age distribution; 92 percent of those interviewed were unmarried, 6 percent were married, and the remaining 1 percent were widowed or divorced. Few reported families and those were small; only 4 laborers or 2 percent of the total, reported more than 1 dependent (Tables 2, 3).

Had they come at harvest time the enumerators would have found numerous non-resident single men working in the fields; but at the time of the survey, the laborers were chiefly resident single men. Two-thirds had been born in Minnesota and all but 7 had been born in either that State or its western neighbor, South Dakota (Table 4). Only 1 of these 7 had come to Minnesota before 1936. However, 44 workers had left the State seeking work elsewhere one or more times since 1930.

Table 2.- Marital status of 207 agricultural laborers, by age,
Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, September 1936

Marital status	Total	Age					
		15-19	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69
		years	years	years	years	years	years
Unmarried	192	27	109	30	12	11	3
Married	12	-	7	2	2	1	-
Widowed or divorced	3	-	-	-	2	1	-
Totals	207	27	116	32	16	13	3

Table 3.- Number of dependents of 207 agricultural laborers,
Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, September 1936

Number of dependents	Laborers	
	Number	Percent
0	195	94.2
1	8	3.9
2	1	.5
3	-	-
4	2	.9
5	1	.5
Total	207	100.0

Table 4.- Nativity and residence of 207 farm laborers, Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, September 1936

State or country	Nativity		Residence	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Minnesota	139	67.1	190	91.8
Foreign countries	23	11.1	-	-
Iowa	17	8.2	2	1.0
South Dakota	14	6.8	10	4.8
North Dakota	6	2.9	4	1.9
Illinois	3	1.4	-	-
Indiana	2	1.0	-	-
Kentucky	1	.5	-	-
Wisconsin	1	.5	-	-
Montana	-	-	1	.5
Not reported	1	.5	-	-
Totals	207	100.0	207	100.0

Most of the men were general farm laborers, doing whatever tasks were assigned, but 32 were employed solely for harvest work and 20 for the care of livestock. Had the survey occurred a few weeks later, at the height of corn husking, more persons employed only for harvest work would have been interviewed and probably more transient laborers would have been found.

Tenure Experience

The theory of the "agricultural ladder" assumes that the young farm laborer is able in time to become a tenant and eventually an owner. The high proportion of young men here might suggest that these workers are serving their apprenticeship in farming and may ultimately become farm operators. But it is also possible to descend the "ladder," and such was the case with 10 percent of this particular group. There were 4 men who were still operating farms, obviously supplementing their incomes by working on other farms for wages. Eighteen others had been tenant operators at one time. They had quit chiefly because of general inability to "make a go of it," as shown by such expressions as "no profits," lack of money or credit," and "wished to try something else."

Table 5.- Previous farm-operation experience of 207 farm laborers, Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, 1936

Experience	Totals	
	Number	Percent
None	182	87.9
Tenant	22	10.6
Owner	2	1.0
Owner and tenant	1	.5
Total	207	100.0

Income

Incomes ranged from mere maintenance to \$775 for the 12 months preceding the survey (Table 6). However, three-fifths reported from \$150 to \$299, and slightly less than 30 percent reported from \$200 to \$249. Generally, these workers had low incomes; in fact 91 percent fell below \$350, and the average total cash income was only \$210. Of this, \$185 was attributed to agricultural earnings, a small portion to relief, and the remainder to nonagricultural work. The few dependents added nothing to the earnings of the group. Only 22 of the laborers, or 11 percent, had non-agricultural earnings, hence, by far the larger proportion depended solely on their earnings as farm laborers.

Table 6.- Total income, September 1935 - August 1936, of 193 agricultural workers, Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota

				:Agricultural:		Nonagricultural :			
Total	:Number:	Percent:	earnings	: earnings	: earnings	: Work relief			
income	:	:	Average	: Number	: Average:	Number:	Average		
\$ 1 - 49	10	5.2	\$ 24.00	-	-	-	-		
50 - 99	13	6.7	72.92	-	-	-	-		
100 - 149	20	10.4	109.40	-	-	-	-		
150 - 199	35	18.1	162.97	2	\$ 19.50	-	-		
200 - 249	57	29.5	210.32	2	107.50	1	\$ 10.00		
250 - 299	26	13.5	231.31	8	91.88	1	180.00		
300 - 349	15	7.8	282.00	3	119.33	-	-		
350 - 399	7	3.6	305.71	1	248.00	1	180.00		
400 - 449	4	2.1	303.25	1	405.00	1	40.00		
450 - 499	2	1.0	277.50	1	416.00	-	-		
500 and over /1	4	2.1	133.75	4	412.50	1	264.00		
Totals and averages	193	100.0	185.26	22	184.81	5	134.80		

/1 As high as \$775.

Agricultural labor accounted for only \$25 of the \$775 which was the largest income reported. The next largest, \$650, attributed \$300 to farm wages. In very few cases did agricultural earnings exceed the latter figure.

Low incomes reported do not necessarily indicate a starvation plane of living, but rather a restricted level. Of the 23 men whose earnings amounted to less than \$100; 11 worked a part of the year on "home farms" without wages; 1 was a tenant operator whose earnings when hiring out came to only \$40; another who sold insurance reported \$75 earned by agricultural labor; but the remaining 10 men reported only room and board received on the job as additional means of subsistence.

With the exception of one worker 51 years old who had been on the same job at \$5 per month for 9 years, the maximum duration of gainful employment was 70 days.

There was a great deal of variation in individual cases as to the amount of time worked by those who had mixed employment. Approximately, however, the total number of days spent on the farm was equal to the length of time engaged in other work (Table 7).

Relatively few workers had any appreciable amount of property or savings. The item reported most frequently was an automobile. Despite the fact that 96 percent of the laborers lived on the farms on which they worked, nearly one-half of the entire group owned cars "in running

condition." Only 9 had any real estate; 7 of these owned an average of 106 acres of farm land each, and 2 owned homes. Savings in the form of bank accounts averaged \$216 for the 10 who reported this item, and 23 carried an average of \$963 in life insurance.

Table 7.- Days worked in agricultural and nonagricultural employment by 197 farm laborers, /1 Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota

		: Agriculture :		Mixed employment	
Days	:	:	:	Average in	Average,
worked	:	Number	Number	agriculture	nonagricultural
0 - 29		29	-	-	-
30 - 59		6	1	35	20
60 - 89		12	1	51	12
90 - 119		3	2	38	67
120 - 149		27	3	86	49
150 - 179		25	5	88	80
180 - 209		9	4	133	67
210 - 239		12	5	108	111
240 - 269		4	1	8	250
270 - 312		44	4	136	140
Totals		171	26	96	90

/1 The number of days in the 12 months immediately preceding the interview.

Working Hours and Wage Rates

Although different types of laborers are paid on different bases, all work long hours and 6 days a week, and the general farm hands must do chores 7 days a week. Those who worked by the day averaged 10.9 hours per day and those who were employed by the month had 30 minutes more, or an average of 11.4 hours. Fifty percent reported 12 hours or more as the working day. There was, however, no relation between the length of the working day and the wage rate.

In Lac qui Parle County, seasonal or permanent hired laborers are most frequently paid by the month, whereas harvest hands are usually paid by the day or piece. Nearly three-fourths of the group interviewed were paid by the month, and the remainder largely by the day or piece. The reports supplied by operators show a similar distribution, with a predominance of monthly payments at the time the survey was made.

The average rate of pay without regard to perquisites was \$26.87 per month and \$1.43 per day, as reported by the laborers, and \$27.40 and \$1.64 respectively as reported by the operators (Table 8). Only 2 laborers reported being paid by the hour, 15 and 25 cents respectively, and

Table 8.- Time wage rates paid 179 agricultural laborers,
Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota

Wage rate	Laborers' reports				Operators' reports			
	Total	Without board	With board	With house	Total	Without board	With board	With house
Per day:								
\$.50	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	<u>/3</u>
.90	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	
1.00	9	1	8	-	8	-	8	
1.25	1	-	1	-	2 <u>/1</u>	-	2 <u>/1</u>	
1.50	8	1	7	-	14	-	14	
1.60	1	1	-	-	-	-	-	
1.75	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	
2.00	3	-	3	-	5	-	5	
2.25	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	
2.50	2	-	2	-	5	-	5	
4.50	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	
Totals	26	3	23	-	39	-	39	
Averages	\$1.43	\$1.37	\$1.43	-	\$1.64	-	\$1.64	
Per month:								
\$ 5.00	1	-	1	-	1	-	1	-
13.00	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-
15.00	7	-	7	-	6	-	6	-
18.00	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
20.00	15	-	14	1	10	-	9	1
22.00	4 <u>/2</u>	-	4 <u>/2</u>	-	3	-	3	-
25.00	40	-	37	3	46	1	42	3
26.00	1	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
27.50	1	-	1	-	3	-	3	-
30.00	44	-	42	2	51	-	50	1
35.00	13	-	12	1	13	-	13	-
37.50	1	-	-	1	1	-	1	-
40.00	3	-	2	1	3	-	3	-
41.70	-	-	-	-	1	-	1	-
45.00	1	-	-	1	1	-	-	1
Totals	132	-	122	10	140	1	133	6
Averages	\$26.87	-	\$26.51	\$31.25	\$27.40	\$25.00	\$27.37	\$28.33

/1 One at \$1.20.

/2 One at \$21; two at \$22.50.

/3 Rates per day with house were not requested of the operators.

one received \$6.25 per week, all with board. Farm laborers generally receive additional wages in the form of perquisites but evaluation of these items is quite difficult and rates of pay seem not to be determined by them. Both operators and laborers reported higher wages for men who had the use of a house than for those receiving only board. The better workers probably received better pay as well as more valuable perquisites. However, since the greater number were unmarried, very few received the use of a house instead of room and board.

The average rates obscure the concentrations on specific figures. Two-thirds of those who were paid by the month received either \$25 or \$30. Though the average daily rate was \$1.43 the more usual actual rate would be \$1.00 or \$1.50

Table 9.- Piece rates and daily earnings in husking corn,
Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota

: Operators' reports :			Laborers' reports			
Rate per :	:	:	1936	:	1935	
bushel	:Number:	Average daily:	:Average daily:	:	Average daily	
:	: earnings	:Number:	earnings	:Number:	earnings	
\$.03	-	-	-	5	\$ 2.92	
.04	-	-	1	\$ 1.00	12	2.74
.05	11	\$ 1.57	10	1.94	25	2.83
.06	5	2.34	3	1.77	4	3.63
.07	3	3.07	3	2.87	-	-
.08	3	3.77	3	3.33	3	2.83
.09	1	3.00	1	3.00	-	-
.10	2	2.25	1	1.50	-	-
Totals or averages	25	\$ 2.28	22	\$ 2.22	49	\$ 2.88

Corn husking is the chief piece work of Lac qui Parle County. During the survey 22 workers were found at this job. Forty-nine of those who were interviewed had worked on piece rates during the previous season. Where the rate is not raised to compensate for the poor yield or some other factor, the higher rates increase the average earnings per day. A comparison of data supplied by operators and laborers for 1936 indicates rather close agreement for average daily earnings without regard to rate (Table 9). However, a comparison of the laborers' reports of average daily earnings in 1936 with those of 1935 indicates that they considered the working days of 1935 more profitable.

Comparison of average wage rates for Minnesota as gathered by the Federal Crop Reporting Service and for Lac qui Parle County as gathered by this study are given in Table 10. In many of the classifications there are too few cases to make fair comparisons of averages. In those where the number of cases justifies comparison, the averages of laborers' reports are below those of the operators' reports whether gathered through this survey or through the Federal Crop Reporting Service.

Table 10.- Comparison of wage rates for Minnesota and for Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, October 1936

Source of data	Per month		Per day	
	With	Without	With	Without
	board	board	board	board
Federal Crop Reporting Service <u>/1</u>	\$30.00	\$40.75	\$ 1.60	\$ 2.20
Operators' reports <u>/2</u>	27.37	25.00 <u>/3</u>	1.64	<u>/4</u>
Laborers' reports <u>/2</u>	26.51	<u>/4</u>	1.43	1.37 <u>/5</u>

/1 Federal Crop Reporting Service figures are based on reports of farm operators who regularly report labor among other items. This line represents the Minnesota averages as of October 1, 1936.

/2 Operators and laborers were interviewed in Lac qui Parle County during September and October, 1936.

/3 One case only.

/4 No cases reported.

/5 Three cases.

Tenure of Employment

Because of the character of the industry, instability of employment is the rule. Even in this relatively stable type of farming (dominated by the family-size farm) there are great fluctuations in employment of labor. On these farms reporting hired laborers at the time of the survey the average number per farm was 1.1; at the busiest time, July and August, it was 2.1; and at the slack time it dropped to 0.5. The number employed at the slack period is about one-fifth as great as the number employed during the busy season. Haying, small-grain harvesting, and care of livestock make the middle of summer the peak of activity; corn husking in the fall brings the second busiest time.

The average length of employment was less than a year and only one-fifth of those interviewed had been working on the same job more than 8 months. A third secured their jobs during September or October, the months

Table 11.- Date of beginning for 194 present farm jobs,
Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, September -
October 1936

Date of beginning	Number	Cumulative percentage
Previous to 1930	7	3.6
1930	2	4.6
1931	2	5.7
1932	2	6.7
1933	3	8.2
1934	4	10.3
1935 January	-	10.3
February	-	10.3
March	1	10.8
April	1	11.3
May	1	11.9
June	-	11.9
July	-	11.9
August	-	11.9
September	-	11.9
October	7	15.5
November	2	16.5
December	4	18.6
1936 January	1	19.1
February	4	21.1
March	33	38.1
April	31	54.1
May	1	54.6
June	3	56.2
July	9	60.8
August	8	64.9
September	35	83.0
October	33	100.0

Table 12.- Methods of placement of hired farm
laborers, Lac qui Parle County,
Minnesota, September 1936

Method	Laborers' reports: Operators' reports			
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent /1
Laborers' search	70	35.9	103	56.3
Sought by employer	70	35.9	168	91.8
Through a friend	39	20.0	-	-
Public employment office	-	-	8	4.4
Advertised for it	2	1.0	3	1.6
Relief agency	-	-	1	.5
Miscellaneous	14	7.2	2	1.1

/1 Percent of 183 operators who report a given method; as an operator may report more than one method this column does not total 100 percent.

of the survey. The average length of job for those paid by the hour or by the day was much less than for those being paid by the month (Table 11).

Direct contact between the prospective employer and employee was the general method of hiring laborers or obtaining jobs. In some cases the laborer reported that a friend told him of the job. No laborer used an employment agency, public or private, though 10 operators had used such agencies (Table 12).

Community Participation

The actual extent of the laborers' participation in community life is difficult to determine. Only a few belonged to formal organizations; 2 were members of a nonagricultural labor union; and 1 was a member of the Farmers' Union. Four other workers, 2 for each organization, had formerly been members of the Farmers' Union and the Farm Bureau.

As to the informal social contacts, the movies, church, and shopping centers drew most of the workers several times a month. Community entertainments and ball games drew their share, and comparatively large numbers of workers had attended farmers' institutes or farm-practice demonstrations. Each of these serves to broaden the acquaintance of the worker with the groups about him (Table 13).

Table 13.- Community participation of 207 white agricultural laborers, Lac qui Parle County, Minnesota, September 1935 - September 1936

Activity	: Number : reporting	: Percent : reporting	: Average : reported
Shopping	198	95.7	58.2
Religious meetings	192	92.8	29.3
Movies	174	84.1	28.6
Ball games	122	58.9	10.7
Community entertainments	119	57.5	7.8
Circus	94	45.4	2.0
Fishing trips	87	42.0	4.7
Visits to friends or relatives	83	40.1	2.6
Farm-practice demonstrations	25	12.1	2.2
Farmers' institutes	24	11.6	2.4

The hired farm laborers of Lac qui Parle are not a group set apart socially or economically; they participate in numerous social gatherings of the communities in which they live. To a large extent the work is done by young unmarried men who presumably leave the status of agricultural laborers as they grow older. However, since the incomes reported were not high and the number of working days during the year was not great, it is not clear from this study how they can acquire the means of climbing the "agricultural ladder."

